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ABSTRACT

Literacy education concerns itself with assessing student needs and determining the appropriate methods for meeting them, without considering the ethical framework in which those "needs" find meaning. This paper argues that a notion of reflective communication, based on Jurgen Habermas's theory of "Discourse," provides an alternative ideal for literacy education that avoids reduction to political or economic function while taking into account profound social differences. Discourse highlights a fundamental dimension of language that is undeveloped in current literacy practices: the cognitive and emotive ability to consciously reflect on validity claims and adopt unfamiliar perspectives. Discourse also provides an ideal that both identifies the pragmatic function that literacy plays in social life and distances it from any determinate social function, allowing it to be made meaningful for learners at different educational levels and with different social backgrounds. Considered are both Paulo Freire's laying the groundwork for the discussion of literacy as a practice that helps give meaning to human existence and George Herbert Mead's alternative conception of meaning that understands language as product of social interaction. The paper hopes to clarify what is intrinsically valuable about literacy education, even in contexts that seem to be dominated by economic considerations, and thus give teachers and learners an increased sense of importance in their work. Contains 24 notes. (NKA)

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Beyond Instrumental Literacy: Discourse Ethics and Literacy Education

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Literacy may be seen as a good from a number of perspectives that are in direct tension: Some see literacy as means to increasing production, others as the basis for participatory democracy, and still others as a catalyst for social revolution. Without clarification, these conflicting objectives will obviously tend to produce incoherent curricula and standards, undermining our confidence in the value of literacy education. This conceptual ambiguity is tied to the more serious problem of a failure in the prevailing accounts of literacy to conceive of their goals independently of particular political and economic functions. To see the learner as merely preparing for a determinate social function such as filling the current needs of the job market, suggests that there is only a practical problem of supplying the student with a set of "tools" to fulfill their function in society. Literacy education then concerns itself with assessing student needs and determining the appropriate methods for meeting them, without considering the ethical framework in which those "needs" find meaning. This ethical context must be critically engaged in order to provide both clarity and a deeper, non-mechanical sense of purpose to literacy practice.

In response to this instrumental conception of literacy, I argue that a notion of reflective communication, based on Jürgen Habermas's theory of "Discourse," provides an alternative ideal for literacy education that avoids reduction to political or economic function while taking into account profound social differences. Discourse highlights a fundamental dimension of language that is undeveloped in current literacy practices: the cognitive and emotive ability to consciously reflect on validity claims and adopt unfamiliar perspectives. I argue that Discourse provides an ideal that both identifies the pragmatic function that literacy plays in social life and distances it from any determinate social function, allowing it to be made meaningful for learners at different educational

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levels and with different social backgrounds.

Literacy can be understood as an objective social scientific category referring to the basic ability to read and write, through such tests as merely signing one's name, filling out a job application, or reading a bus schedule. Using literacy as a quantifiable category of research allows for interesting studies on the relation of reading and writing to other aspects of social life. Social scientific study of literacy can also provide fruitful comparisons of cultures that are "literate" with those that are "oral."[1] Furthermore, one can approach literacy from the standpoint of developmental psychology, studying the cognitive dimension of language acquisition, reading, and writing.

However, my use of "literacy" refers not only to the discrete skills of reading or writing, but more generally, to the set of educational practices that provide basic education in the industrialized West. While these practices include the work done in primary and secondary schools, literacy education usually highlights practices outside the schools and universities that are explicitly and exclusively concerned with the provision of basic skills. English as a second language (ESL), adult basic education (ABE), and high school equivalency (GED) study are some of the most common types of basic education programs. Literacy education in this sense aims at a state of "literacy" for its students which is usually meant to be the minimum standard of education for successful participation in society, especially in the contexts of work and citizenship. However, this standard is difficult, if not impossible, to define in a useful way. Since these students have often fulfilled the most rudimentary standards for being able to read and write, classifying their needs becomes problematic. The coherence and focus for literacy practices must then derive from a standard, not in the sense of a fixed educational "level," but in the sense of ideals that are used to guide literacy practitioners and students in diverse contexts and varying educational levels.

Yet such ideals often take the form of vague, romantic appeals to "personal growth" and "empowerment" that are difficult to implement and often have a condescending tone toward the students.[2] As a result, the search for clarity and explicit goals has lead to the restriction of literacy to specific "functions": by analyzing the essential functions of a citizen or worker, policy makers have hoped to create curricula to prepare students to fill these precise roles. While this does little to address the problem of general literacy goals, "functional literacy" embodies one of the strongest tendencies in the field of basic education because it connects study with very tangible "outcomes" in a way that is meant to satisfy the learner and the provider of the education. Policymakers and students alike are often most concerned with the goal of work, so they will naturally agree that study should be directed at only those skills that are clearly needed on the job. The workplace can supposedly provide specific guidelines for literacy, while meeting both individual and societal needs.

There are so many critiques of this position in education, both radical and conservative, that I will not spend much time responding to it. This picture of

literacy continues a tradition of modeling education on a Taylorist conception of workplace efficiency, where tasks are reduced to their most essential elements so that they can be standardized in order to maximize production.[3] Schooling that focuses on such specified outcomes can be at best referred to as training and at worst as indoctrination. I am taking for granted that no matter how basic literacy goals may be, they must be conceived of in a genuinely educative way, in a way that broadens, rather than restricts, the social roles that learners will play. Yet, I believe we must respond to the power of functional literacy by providing new standards of clarity in the ideals that motivate literacy, so that it can be held accountable to these ideals and better protected from the fluctuating priorities of the job market.

The richest and most well known response to a purely economic and mechanistic approach to literacy is, of course, that of Paulo Freire. He lays the groundwork for the discussion of literacy as a practice that helps give meaning to human existence, in addition to fulfilling practical need. He connects the ethical and political dimensions of literacy to practice much more clearly than many Progressives' naive assumption that learning to read is somehow connected to building "moral character." He shows that the wrong kind of education can be dehumanizing and oppressive in its objectification of the learner as a receptacle for conventional beliefs.[4] In his "problem-posing" model of literacy education, he responds to this danger by seeing students as co-creators of meaning through active participation in dialogue with one another. The learner is supposed to contribute to the educational practice as much as the teacher. For Paulo Freire, learning in this context is itself the fulfillment of human being through its liberating and empowering consequences. In critical dialogue, Freire thinks that humans become free, "by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism."[5] In actively learning with others, literacy students overturn meanings that were imposed on them by authoritarian structures and thus gain a sense of creative participation in language.

As appealing as Freire's picture may seem in comparison with a narrow functionalist account, there are problematic tensions in his theory, especially with respect to the status of truth and objectivity. For example, he argues that, "subjectivity and objectivity thus join in dialectical unity producing knowledge in solidarity with action, and vice versa."[6] Freire's gloss of the problems surrounding the status of objectivity in meaning and value creates problems for his approach to language and thus literacy education. Freire wants learners to actively construct their own knowledge: "to exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it."[7] Yet, he does not want to imply that learning is purely subjective - the learner does not only "name" the world, but also "reads" the world. He argues that, "the role of the problem-posing educator is to create, together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of *logos*."[8] His reference to "true knowledge" and *logos* suggests a notion of reason and language that transcends specific historical contexts, but it is not clear how such an account

can allow for the empowerment of the individual over language. If language is simply a resource for political power, how is its use by the oppressed more legitimate than that of the oppressors? If there is truth beyond *doxa* how do we know when we have found it?

This criticism may seem abstract, but an examination of Freire's literacy textbook reveals what I take to be serious consequences from the ambiguities in his account of truth. Though I do not believe Freire should attempt to be politically neutral or avoid reference to current political events in the text, it is so politically charged without raising critical questions about its own claims that it reads, in places, like a piece of propaganda. For example,

> To make a new society, we, too, need to work, we need to transform the old society we still have. It is easier, without a doubt to make a boat than to create a new society. But if Pedro and Antonio made the boat, the People of Sao Tome and Principe, with unity, discipline, work, and vigilance, will create a new society with its vanguard, the MLSTP.[9]

In this text, Freire fails to create explicitly a space where the learners may distinguish their own reactions from the message that the text is trying to send. The context in which Freire intends the book to be read may allow for more critical reflection, but his dogmatic rhetoric in the text suggests "problem disposing" by taking for granted substantive claims that could be open for discussion. Ambiguities surrounding the intersection of truth, dogma, and language in Freire's theory inhibit him from living up to the ideal of critical reflection that characterizes most of his work.

In order to build on Freire's project of linking literacy with ethics or "humanization," it is therefore important to develop a clearer picture of language and its relationship to truth and critical reflection. There is, of course, a mechanistic picture of language that corresponds to the assumptions of functional literacy: It conceives of meaning in terms of discrete concepts, embodied in physiological responses in the brain. In this model, meanings can be determinately analyzed, broken into parts, and built again. Learning requires building meanings from atomistic, neurological responses to stimuli in the world. Education, then, requires simply exposing people to appropriate stimuli so that they can build meanings that are identical to those of everyone else, and thus communicate effectively. This picture, representing the conjunction of a logical-positivist approach to language and a radically behaviorist psychology, shaped approaches to curricula in the early 1900s, and they continue to reflect this influence.[10] There is no explicit place in this understanding of language for critical reflection, since successful use of language requires only learning determinate meanings and following rules of syntax.

George Herbert Mead lays a foundation for an alternative conception of meaning that understands language as product of social interaction. Mead begins with an analysis of gestures in both humans and animals, pointing out

that vocal communication opens up the possibility that we may respond to our own gestures as we expect other people to respond: the reaction to the communication is accessible to both the speaker and the respondent.[11] Symbols become "significant" or have meaning, for Mead, because they not only serve as a stimulus for the speaker but also for the respondent. Meaningfulness is thus dependent on the psychological ability of "unconsciously putting ourselves in the place of others and acting as others act."[12] It is important for Mead, though, that the use of a word does not merely call out a response in the way that a lion's roar might cause one to flee, but also serves as a stimulus by enabling the respondent to participate in a *social* act. Speakers must be able to put themselves in the place of the respondent, anticipating the responses that their gesture will elicit, just as the respondent must be able to imagine the action that the speaker intends. The use of a meaningful symbol, then, is not a simple mechanical cause-effect nexus, but is a shared activity. Meaning, for Mead, exists in relationships among language users rather than as a construction of the individual's mind.

The ability to take on the perspective of another is extended to broad social contexts in Mead's account of language. He explains that the fullest development of the self requires a "generalization" of the "attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, [and the ability to] take their attitudes toward the various phases of social activity."[13] This second stage of development for Mead, in which the generalized other becomes an object for the individual, entails a move from the internalization of individual attitudes to that of social attitudes and processes.[14]

However, Mead's account of a "generalization" of all the diverse cultural and institutional perspectives within a society may seem simplistic, given the profound cultural and linguistic difference in contemporary industrialized societies. It also does not make clear how one may have a critical distance on one's social environment. Mead's theory seems to be more applicable to a homogenous society with tightly bound traditions and/or authority structures, than contemporary society where cultural diversity and manifold institutional roles abound. Mead's approach is extended, however, by contemporary sociolinguists who attempt to analyze the social functions of language across cultures and across discourses within the same culture.[15] This type of linguistic analysis is important for understanding the cultural differences that literacy education must confront, but it does not help us understand how such education can be conceived on a large scale in a diverse society.

The philosopher and sociologist Habermas builds on Mead's theory while revealing its limitations in his attempt to identify the pragmatic requirements of communication in modern democratic societies. He wants to extend Mead's theory to account for the propositional dimension of speech - speech that presupposes distinct claims to validity. Habermas argues that "when the power of tradition is broken," questions of legitimacy and truth arise, allowing people to ask whether or not certain facts and norms are true, rather than simply

internalizing meaning.[16] According to Habermas's theory, then, individuals become fully competent for communication in a complex society, not through an unproblematic synthesis of all existing perspectives, but by reflecting on their own and others claims to validity. Propositional speech thus makes such reflection an important part of communication.

Habermas thinks that the appeal to reason or validity in place of authority creates the possibility of propositional grammar, involving statements that can be true or false. In this development of grammar, three kinds of claims to validity are thrown into relief: (1) claims of truth about the objective or external world; (2) claims of *rightness* about social norms; and (3) claims of *truthfulness* in our own intrapersonal attitude. While all three of these claims are present in each act of speech, only one becomes thematized in any given context.[17] Habermas argues that these different appeals to truth are possible only when language becomes dislodged from an authority structure in which meaning is taken for granted and conformity is assured through the possibility of sanction. Habermas extends Mead's account of the self by showing that the consciousness of language and the appeals to truth that accompany this awareness are part of the self's integration, through its experience of the external world and social norms.

Although these validity claims condition all of our interactions, they remain tacit in most of our communication, rarely surfacing as issues in themselves. However, in "Discourse," Habermas believes that the ability to consciously distinguish between these different appeals to truth becomes the focus of the activity: Discourse[18] (a form of argumentation), "serves to focus on and test validity claims that are initially raised implicitly in communicative action and naively carried along with it."[19] Habermas notes that this form of interaction is confined to situations where the pressure to act is minimized, allowing people to reflect on the claims being made. Discourse thus depends upon settings where routine interaction is suspended and reflective dialogue made possible. It also requires what Habermas calls the "hypothetical attitude," through which events and norms, taken for granted in the normal flow of communication, become hypothetical or capable of being true or false. However, this does not require a completely disinterested perspective from the individual, who is thoroughly embedded in a social context; it does not provide a view from "nowhere." Since Habermas recognizes the individual as a product of traditions and group affiliations, he believes that the interests of the participants play an important role in highlighting a range of issues that may be the focus of Discourse. These issues may be considered hypothetically by examining them in a context in which there is no immediate pressure to act.[20] Through the hypothetical attitude, one suspends beliefs relevant to the issue, listens to the arguments of others, and examines issues from the perspectives of others. This attitude enables one to more consciously and completely adopt the perspectives of others with whom one is arguing and thus come to a rationally motivated agreement. In this stage of communication, for Habermas, reason surpasses the simple desire to conform as a motivation for agreement. While this does not mean we are always successful in viewing the relevant issues hypothetically, it

implies that genuine agreement presupposes that all the participants are trying to appeal to reasons that are accessible to everyone involved.

Thus Discourse requires not only a shift in grammar, but also depends upon ethical presuppositions, that is, "Discourse ethics." In order for agreement to be rationally motivated everyone must freely, fully, and honestly participate, without being constrained by internal or external coercion.[21] These principles are not mere conventions, but amount to the ideal conditions for speech, according to Habermas. This is not to say that they are frequently fulfilled, but rather that the *possibility* of this fullest stage of communication is implicit in all of our speech. For Habermas, inescapable normative commitments underlie language as the medium of communication, which enables the synthesis of our relationship to truth, morality, and identity. He is hypothesizing that the possibility of free and rational agreement is presupposed in our intuition that we *can* understand one another, even when these suppositions are often contradicted in practice. Habermas suggests that when we realize our sense of fully having understood another, there is an effort to meet the other in a well-intentioned agreement that is free from manipulation, deceit, or coercion.

I believe that Habermas's notion of Discourse, with several important qualifications, may serve as a guide to literacy education that addresses the deficiencies in existing accounts. First, in contrast with economic functionalist approaches to literacy, Discourse connects literacy with a larger ethical ideal that cannot be reduced to a determinate economic role. Yet, at the same time, it is an ideal that is grounded in the fundamental presuppositions of communication and is thus relevant for people who need to develop even basic linguistic skills. Discourse locates literacy within the ethical framework of human interaction that is connected with pragmatic needs of communication. Second, Habermas's theory helps recover language's central role in personal and social growth. More specifically, he implies that learning should focus on strengthening our consciousness of meaning and our specific claims about truth, rightness, and sincerity. These claims pervade everyday interaction as well as institutional contexts, such that consciousness of them may provide a stronger sense of identity as well as a more critical disposition. This propositional aspect of grammar is currently ignored in most literacy education in favor of attention to syntactic rules, which encourages the abstraction of literacy study from its social context. Finally, the awareness of claims to validity that Discourse encourages is simultaneously directed at improving our ability to adopt the perspectives of others in diverse contexts. Cultivation of the hypothetical attitude, through active discourse, will encourage not only a distancing from one's own perspective, but the interpretive work of taking on the perspectives of others. This focus on perspective-taking in literacy practice will help learners sensitively respond to social differences and help them understand social contexts with which they are not familiar.

These benefits of Discourse as an ideal for literacy can also be expressed in the form of a primitive sketch of aims for literacy education:

1. Fostering reflective communication as both an educational and an ethical aim, distinct from specific political or economic roles.
2. Promoting consciousness of claims to validity (objective, normative, subjective) in addition to syntax, through application to diverse subjects.
3. Emphasizing interpretive skills that enable genuine understanding of other perspectives.
4. Creating the literacy classroom as a space that itself strives to fulfill the prerequisites of genuine Discourse: mutual respect, reciprocity, and time for reflection by all participants (including the educator).

These guides would serve to focus the goals of literacy education, but are clearly of little value in standardizing measures of evaluation for students or programs. Further elaboration of these aims may eventually contribute to the creation or revision of curricula, though my purpose in this paper is theoretical in attempting to ground literacy in an account of language that is explicitly related to ethical and epistemological ideals.

I believe this appropriation of Habermas resolves the tension we found in Freire between truth and empowerment. Although Discourse is fundamentally social and provides the foundation for cooperation toward common ends, each individual is "empowered" through increasing consciousness of self, social norms, and the objective world. When we become aware of the validity claims in each aspect of experience, our understanding of the world is enriched and our ability to participate critically is strengthened. There is a notion of truth, based on reflective agreement and connected with pragmatic need, but it is also limited by the ethical context in which this agreement is made. The political dimension of knowledge is also preserved in Habermas's theory as it is for Freire: if the agreement that is the basis of truth (or rightness) is not made in the context of free and equal communication, it can be critiqued and revised for this reason. The complex ways that subcultures, such as profit-oriented markets, may distort communication, according to Habermas, also suggest the need for political action to protect contexts in which genuine communication can be fostered.[22] Yet it is important that his account of communication implies political implications, rather than the other way around. Literacy that employs a Habermasian notion of language thus aims first at genuinely communicative activity, which will have significant political implications, but such education will not be *defined* by specific political goals.

In borrowing so heavily from Habermas for this project, I am also resisting some important strains in his theory. First, I am departing from his discussion of the ontogenesis of communication and its correlation to a developmental moral psychology. Not only are these empirical claims that I am not in a position to confirm or deny, they present problems for adult learners whose relationship to language is developmentally mature, even though they have room for growth in their consciousness of language. Therefore, I am borrowing the hierarchies in Habermas's theory of language in a logical sense and not a developmental one. We can use Habermas's description of communication as a guide for the study of basic linguistic skills, without accepting an age-determined, unilinear

unfolding of these skills in human development.

Because Discourse seems to require such complicated cognitive and normative capabilities, questions about its appropriateness for students of basic skills will arise. After all, genuine Discourse is an ideal that is rarely achieved by even the most literate people. If this ideal were adopted in literacy study, should we all not head back to the basics? While it is tempting to answer yes to this question, it misses the point that the presuppositions of Discourse are implicit in all of our communication. There is no reason why these principles may not guide the most fundamental educational practices as well as expert, academic contexts. Although Discourse will be applied differently in basic education than in higher education, the kind of reflection required for Discourse should provide a necessary continuity between the two levels. Of course, it is important, then, to separate the prose that Habermas uses to articulate his theory, which is extremely abstruse, from the concepts he presents. His theory will need to be brought to life in basic educational contexts by reflective teachers. In particular, the notion of "validity claims" is too strongly tied to the practice of informal logic and rational procedure. I believe, however, that the notion of validity can be re-interpreted in different contexts, and made meaningful for a variety of disciplines and communication styles.

Though I suggest the need for an equal attention to the three different types of validity claims (Aim two), it must be stressed that the subjective realm of experience has been short-changed, both in Habermas's theory and in most educational contexts. The positivism that has colored curriculum theory from the turn of the century has collapsed personal and social dimensions of experience into that of the objective - into empirical science. Habermas, while paying tribute to all three perspectives, glosses the complex role of subjective experience. Mead's analysis suggests that while our sense of our own identity is tied to our understanding of others, the self plays the integral function of reconciling the diverse norms in which we participate. The psychological depth of the individual cannot be ignored, even in social participation. Therefore, basic education must foster space for the creative expression of this subjective depth as an essential part of cultivating reflection, responsibility, and empathy. Increased attention to intra-subjective experience suggests the potential of the visual and verbal arts as part of a notion of literacy.

Furthermore, the third aim above, which expresses the need for interpretive skills in order to understand the perspectives of others, appears to be in tension with some aspects of Habermas's theory. The universalist and deontological nature of Habermas's ethics would seem to put it in tension with the ability to interpret culturally specific perspectives. Indeed, in his attention to formal requirements of speech, Habermas deemphasizes this part of communication. Yet, in responding to the work of Carol Gilligan, he notes that the formal justification for Discourse ethics cannot be confused with its inability to be applied in specific contexts. He goes on to add that there is an important emotional dimension to applying the theory in context.[23] Seyla Benhabib explains in more detail that "interpretive" and "narrative" skills are essential to

the ability to take on another's perspective in Discourse ethics.[24] Nevertheless, Habermas's response to this subject is cursory, implying that he underestimates the amount of interpretive work necessary for consciously taking the position of another, even though it is entailed by his theory. Because of its importance for genuine communication, especially in multicultural contexts, I have highlighted the importance of the interpretive aspect of Discourse for literacy.

In this essay, I have attempted to articulate some guideposts for the practice of literacy education, by exploring the ethical presuppositions of communication based on Habermas's notion of "discourse." After indicating the weaknesses in existing accounts of literacy education, I argued that Discourse provides an ideal for literacy that is grounded in the reflective use of language and is therefore not framed by determinate political or economic functions. At the same time, Discourse encourages a sensitive response to social differences and unfamiliar customs. This ideal for literacy can provide teachers and policymakers of literacy education with a way of seeing their work as both related to the practical needs of learners and connected to an ethical motivation that transcends any narrow economic function. I hope that it will help clarify what is intrinsically valuable about literacy education, even in contexts that seem to be dominated by economic considerations, and thus give teachers and learners an increased sense of importance to their work.

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1. See Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy" in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

2. Suzanne de Castell et al., "On Defining Literacy," in *Literacy, Society and Schooling*, ed. Suzanne De Castell et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 7-8.

3. Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1986), chap. 4.

4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1992) chap. 2.

5. Ibid., 74.

6. Ibid., 22.

7. Ibid., 76.

8. Ibid., 68.

9. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1987), 83.

10. See Kliebard, *Struggle for the American Curriculum*, chap. 4.

11. G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self, Society*, ed. Charles Morris (1934; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 67-68.

12. Ibid., 69.

13. Ibid., 154-55.

14. Ibid., 158.

15. See for example, Monique van der Westen, "Literacy Education and Gender: The Case of Honduras," in *Functional Literacy*, ed. Ludo Verhoeven (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994) and John S. Lofty, "Time to Write: Resistance to Literacy in a Maine Fishing Community," in *The Right toLiteracy*, ed. Andrea Lunsford et al. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990).

16. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. Two, Life World and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 40.

17. Jürgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (London: Heinemann, 1979), 65-66.

18. Habermas's definition of Discourse (provided above) is a specialized use of the term and not to be confused with linguists' use of "discourse" as any stretch of language that is the subject of analysis. To avoid confusion, I am capitalizing Habermas's special use of this term.

19. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 158.

20. Ibid., 135.

21. Ibid., 80.

22. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. Two*, 330.

23. Ibid., 179-82.

24. See Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 16.